

# Observations on an expert review program for questionnaire evaluation

Carl Ramirez

U.S. Government Accountability Office



The views and statements expressed are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect official policies of the U.S. Government Accountability Office.



# Expert Evaluation of Questionnaires

*Appraisal by survey research methodologists to identify potential problems*

- Cognitive forms appraisal (Forsyth & Lessler, 1991)
- Comparison to other methods for problem detection (Willis, et al., 1999)
- Systems and frameworks
  - QAS-99: Question Appraisal System
  - QUAID: Question Understanding Aid



# Questionnaire Surveys: the GAO Context

*An independent, nonpartisan research agency of the  
U.S. Congress*

- Products include financial and performance audits, policy analyses, investigations
- Surveys are typically one-time, specialty population, list-frame samples of individuals and establishments, using self-administered Web or fillable forms
- Questionnaires may collect financial, behavioral, autobiographical, or attitudinal data



# GAO Peer Review Protocol

- Purpose: reduce error, technical review, consistency
- Reviewers: methodologists external to project
- Timing: before and/or during pretesting
- Scope:
  - Primary: instrument design – wording, order, visual design and layout
  - Secondary: respondent/subject characteristics, mode, burden and sensitivity
  - Excluded: research objective and justification, sampling, administration, estimation



# Review Domains

- Themes: consistency, economy, clear visual design
- Format and visual design
- Introduction (and related communication)
- Instructions
- Navigation
- Questions (construction and wording)
- Answers
- Functionality (electronic)



# Examples from Checklist

- 25. ☐ **Visually separate nonsubstantive answer categories** (such as “don’t know,” “not applicable”) from scale answers with lines, shading, or space, in check-one questions and matrixes.



# Examples from Checklist

34. ☐ **Question wording should accurately reflect and reinforce answer format.**

For example:

34.1. ☐ **Check-one questions:** Ask “Which one of the following...” instead of “Which of the following...”

34.2. ☐ **Dates:** When requesting a beginning date and end date that are to be recorded in two separate answer spaces, consider asking: “On what dates did X begin and end...” instead of “When did X take place?”



# Reflections on the Protocol

- Reviews identify problems and result in changes
- Designers generally satisfied
- Reviews are variable
- Specificity of review – some designers report mismatch of expectations and actual
- Scope of review – some mismatch



# Evaluating the Protocol

*Assess nature and extent of variability between reviewers; quality and quantity of problems surfaced, and improvements resulting*

- Compare across reviewers
- Compare across methods
- Measure costs: time, false positives
- Measure benefits: problems/solutions found, building awareness and design skills



# Revising the Protocol

- Change scope of review?
- Increase standardization of review through training, resources, methods?
- Enable designers to request targeted feedback?